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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF/C FOR LISA KORTE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/15/2019

TAGS: PGOV PREL GB EK

SUBJECT: GABON: ALI BONGO INSTALLATION, IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Classified By: Charge Kathleen FitzGibbon for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: Ali Bongo Ondimba, the son of former President Omar Bongo who ruled Gabon for 41 years, will be formally inaugurated as the country's fourth president on October 16. The Constitutional Court's validation of the August 30 election results on October 11 and Bongo's installation ends weeks of political uncertainty. Bongo faces formidable challenges as he takes office, including from within his own ruling party as some of his moves may challenge the "party barons," who had become accustomed to being paid off by his father. Personal interests continue to divide the opposition and its failure to effectively challenge the election results have further damaged its ability to represent the public. Serious economic and social problems are besetting the country, with the most pressing being a country-wide strike by public school teachers and other civil servants. Probably the most glaring change for Gabon will be in a decline of its regional influence. Bongo, the son, does not have the same long-established international and regional credentials as a peacemaker as his father, but Gabon's likely election to a U.N. Security Council seat will keep Libreville on the international radar.

Bongo publically claims to be a reformer, reportedly interested in changing the way things are done in Gabon, but he will have an uphill battle against a deeply entrenched and corrupt system, the one that produced him. This cable examines the implication of Ali Bongo's presidency. End Summary.

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For the Government  
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¶12. (C) Bongo's claims to be a reformer will be put to the test as he names his new cabinet. Embassy contacts say that he is looking to reduce the number of ministers and delegated ministers from 47 to a more reasonable 30. If this were to occur, it will involve significant restructuring of the ministries to combine services. Under his father, Omar Bongo, ministerial posts were plumb patronage and handed out to as a reward for loyalty. Ali Bongo's goal of reducing the number of ministers in the government will meet with pushback and reluctance by a number of "barons" and those who will lose influence in the government. Similarly, many civil servants, who have been out of work for months due to strikes, will demand to keep their jobs and wages even as their ministries are eliminated.

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For the PDG  
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¶13. (C) Ali Bongo overcame resistance within the ruling party to climb into the Presidency. Now, as the clear leader of the ruling Democratic Party of Gabon (PDG), he has a number of PDG "barons" to thank for their support and funding during

his presidential bid. Bongo's promises to be a reformer will be difficult to reconcile as he is forced to reward the old guard of the PDG for standing with him over other factions. His brother-in-law, Foreign Minister Paul Tongui, may be particularly difficult to handle. He has done little as Foreign Minister and may want to be rewarded with a financially juicier post, such as a return to Finance Minister.

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For the Opposition  
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¶4. (C) Bongo's installation means that the fragmented and increasingly marginalized opposition will have to come up with new strategies to compete with the ruling party and to have a role in governance. The initial declaration of Ali Bongo's victory galvanized the opposition for a few days, but continuing animosity and rivalries between the two most important names, Pierre Mamboundou and Andre Mba Obame, make it even more difficult for Bongo to effectively incorporate opposition perspectives. With Ali Bongo's investiture imminent, Embassy contacts say that Bongo has begun to reach out to Pierre Mamboundou in the hope of bringing him into the new government. If this occurs, the opposition will lose much of its legitimacy with the people and force Mba Obame, widely viewed as a government collaborator, into the sole leadership role in the years of rebuilding that will come. The opposition's ability to create a popular base on which to build for the future has been severely circumscribed.

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For Gabon  
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¶5. (C) When Ali Bongo is sworn in as president, he faces a number of significant social challenges. Most pressing is the current teachers' strike. Despite the school year beginning on October 5 no classes in Gabonese public schools have been held. Public school teachers are demanding the government address their concerns about insufficient pay and poor working conditions. In the past, former President Omar Bongo directly intervened with the teachers to help negotiate a resolution, and as a result the Teachers' Union has refused to negotiate with the Ministry of Education. The Gabonese public will look the teachers' strike as one of the first major tests of the Ali Bongo government. Besides teachers, health care workers and large portions of the civil service have also threatened to go on strike in the coming months.

¶6. (C) The Government of Gabon has serious financial issues to tackle under Ali Bongo. Since the death of Omar Bongo there has been significant capital flight from the country. Embassy contacts say that the lavish funeral for Omar Bongo, the hurried presidential election, and the need to finance Ali Bongo's presidential bid have taxed the financial reserves of the country and the Bongo family. Cash-strapped, the new president will find it difficult to negotiate effectively with the unions, which will expect a pay off to end the strikes.

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For the Region  
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¶7. (C) At the time of his death Omar Bongo was seen as one of Africa's senior statesman and a stabilizing force in regional politics. Ali Bongo does not have the gravitas or longevity of his father, which will greatly reduce Gabon's regional role until Ali Bongo can prove himself as a regional player. One area for improvement could involve neighboring Equatorial Guinea. Under Omar Bongo's regime, relations between the two countries were tense and marred by accusations of coup attempts against one another. Gabon is worried that

Equatorial Guinea, which now holds the largest reserves in the Bank of the Central African States (BEAC), will conspire to oust the current bank governor, a Gabonese who is embroiled in a financial scandal. An improved relationship between Equatorial Guinea and Gabon is likely one of Bongo's early foreign relations goals.

18. (C) Gabon is an uncontested candidate to assume a non-permanent member seat on the U.N. Security Council representing Africa. Neither Ali Bongo nor the government have made any comments on their goals for their tenure on the security council, but it does provide a useful stage by which Bongo can improve his standing with other leaders on the continent.

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For the United States  
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19. (C) Bongo's next steps are critical if he is to overcome doubts about his election following his father's death. He has a delicate balancing act, given the country's potentially precarious economic and social predicaments. His ability to negotiate and bring disparate actors on board will dictate the extent to which his government will respect human rights and the rule of law. Stay tuned.

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